

Donald Trump Wants You to Put on a Sweater

Is Trump the new Jimmy Carter?

[George Dillard](#)



Carter prepares for his fireside chat in 1977 ([public domain](#))

One of the most striking things about the days and months after 9/11 was how little the government asked of us.

If you're old enough, you no doubt remember watching the horrors of those attacks unfold on live television. It instantly felt like a historical turning point. Talking heads on TV made constant comparisons to Pearl Harbor, a moment that propelled the United States into a war effort that cost billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives.

The nation was united in outrage and sorrow — united, we now know, for the last time in the last quarter century. Pundits wondered

how George W. Bush would use this surge of patriotism to better the country and fight its foes. Would there be a draft for the wars that were on the horizon? Would Bush require young people to enroll in a national service corps to improve the country? In those fall days of 2001, I kept waiting to be asked to do something. What role would I play in defeating the scourge of global terrorism?

But George W. Bush never asked me for much. He asked me to report suspicious activity to the authorities, I guess. He asked me to look the other way while the executive branch hoarded power and took away the civil liberties of people it suspected were up to no good. But mostly he wanted me to go shopping.

Yes, shopping. In a remarkable bit of mental gymnastics, the Bush administration decided that the best way to strengthen America and defy Al Qaeda was to be selfish. It was our patriotic duty to revive the airline industry by taking a vacation. As Bush [said](#) just a couple of weeks after the attacks:

When they struck, they wanted to create an atmosphere of fear. And one of the great goals of this nation's war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It's to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed...

Before that, Vice President Dick Cheney had gone on *Meet the Press* and [told](#) Americans that they could

stick their thumb in the eye of the terrorists and say that they've got great confidence in the country, great confidence in our economy, and not let what's happened here in any way throw off their normal level of economic activity. We look forward to recovery later this year from the slowdown period that we've been through, and I have every confidence that that will, in fact, happen.

When host Tim Russert asked whether the Bush administration's proposed tax cuts would need to be postponed or canceled in order

to pay for the wars and anti-terrorism measures to come, Cheney said, “No, I think the tax cut’s crucial.”

So my fellow Americans and I patriotically heeded the call. We paid less in taxes and went on vacation. We indulged our material desires while some of our fellow Americans fought wars conducted on the cheap halfway around the world. We showed Osama bin Laden that we would never compromise our freedom to go to Orlando and buy a bunch of junk.

Bush’s failure to ask the nation to sacrifice after 9/11 was part of a larger shift in American politics. Contrast Bush and Cheney’s call for self-indulgence with this Franklin Roosevelt [speech](#) from 1942:

As I told the Congress yesterday, “sacrifice” is not exactly the proper word with which to describe this program of self-denial. When, at the end of this great struggle we shall have saved our free way of life, we shall have made no “sacrifice.”

The price for civilization must be paid in hard work and sorrow and blood. The price is not too high. If you doubt it, ask those millions who live today under the tyranny of Hitlerism.

Ask the workers of France and Norway and the Netherlands, whipped to labor by the lash, whether the stabilization of wages is too great a “sacrifice.”

Ask the farmers of Poland and Denmark, of Czechoslovakia and France, looted of their livestock, starving while their own crops are stolen from their land, ask them whether “parity” prices are too great a “sacrifice.”

Ask the businessmen of Europe, whose enterprises have been stolen from their owners, whether the limitation of profits and personal incomes is too great a “sacrifice.”

Ask the women and children whom Hitler is starving whether the rationing of tires and gasoline and sugar is too great a “sacrifice.”

What strikes me about FDR’s speech is that he’s asking Americans to sacrifice for others — it’s not Hitler’s threat to America that requires higher taxes, rationing, and the draft. It’s his threat to

humans an ocean away whose plight Americans could have ignored. Roosevelt wanted Americans to sacrifice so they could make a better world for everyone.

Bush passed up his chance to be a second Roosevelt. I wonder if he did so because he was afraid of being a second Jimmy Carter.

Carter had been the last president before Bush to call for sacrifice from his constituents, and it hadn't gone well. Having taken office amid intertwined energy and economic crises, he decided to speak plainly to the American people. Two weeks after his inauguration, Carter appeared on television in front of a fire, wearing a cardigan, and asked Americans to save energy. He said that Americans

must face the fact that the energy shortage is permanent. There is no way we can solve it quickly.... All of us must learn to waste less energy. Simply by keeping our thermostats, for instance, at 65 degrees in the daytime and 55 degrees at night, we could save half the current shortage of natural gas. There is no way that I, or anyone else in the government, can solve our energy problems if you are not willing to help.

Carter's call for Americans to turn down the heat and throw on a sweater wasn't all that novel; Gerald Ford had asked Americans to drive less, and Richard Nixon had advised Americans to keep the heat at 68.

In 1979, Carter spoke again on television and diagnosed a "crisis of confidence" in the nation that could not be remedied with consumerism:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us. For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years. Two-thirds of our people do not even vote. The productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world.

Carter's advice was mostly admirable — conserve energy, find meaning outside of material wealth, sacrifice for the greater good — but it helped to doom his political career. Many Americans saw him as defeatist and weak. Ronald Reagan, who promised deregulation, abundance, and “morning in America” crushed Carter in the 1980 election.

Ever since, presidents have been wary of asking Americans to sacrifice anything for the greater good. They've cut taxes, increased spending, and rarely asked Americans to endure any kind of hardship.

But recently, a very unlikely figure is asking Americans to sacrifice again — Donald Trump.

Trump has long been a symbol of our era of instant gratification, of conspicuous consumption, of glitzy penthouses and private jets, of dumping one's wives for younger, prettier women, of getting everything you want and hoarding it for yourself.

But now, he and his advisors are telling Americans, in effect, to put on a sweater for a little while.

Trump's economic policies are unleashing [chaos](#) across the American economy. If he had come into office and instituted his promised tariffs in a clean, straightforward, and permanent way, it would have caused a significant economic disruption as other countries retaliated with tariffs of their own and global supply chains realigned. But what Trump's actually doing — haphazardly threatening tariffs, imposing them, rescinding them, then promising to impose them again — is even messier. Meanwhile, Trump's and Elon Musk's wild cuts to the federal government are introducing all

sorts of other uncertainties around regulation and funding into the marketplace.

Businesses, which require predictability in government policy to make plans, seem paralyzed while stock markets fall and [economists](#) predict a possible recession.

As Trump and his advisors hit the airwaves to defend their actions, they've begun to echo Jimmy Carter. Trump has backed off of his rhetoric about a "[Golden Age](#)" in which he [would](#) "bring down the prices of all goods," "starting on day one" while "slashing energy and electricity prices by half within 12 months." Instead, he's now [telling](#) Americans to expect an ominous "period of transition" and refusing to rule out a recession in the coming year.

Trump's advisors are even more forthright in telling Americans that they should be prepared to endure financial pain. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick [told](#) CBS that a recession would be "worth it" because Trump's economic "policies are the most important thing America has ever had." (More important, apparently, than emancipating slaves or giving women the vote!)

Meanwhile, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told Americans that they should seek happiness from things other than material goods. He [advised](#) Americans not to get too worked up about rising prices. After all, "Access to cheap goods is not the essence of the American dream... The American dream is not contingent on cheap baubles they get from China." He reassured Americans that the drop in our 401(k)s is "healthy" and "normal."

I'm sure middle-class Americans appreciate this life advice from men like Bessent ([net worth](#): \$500 million), Lutnick ([net worth](#): at least \$2 billion), and Trump ([net worth](#): \$4 billion). It's good to have role models who can see beyond crass materialism and acquisitiveness to embrace what really matters in life. I await their announcements that they'll get rid of their private jets and beach homes to share in the sacrifice of those of us who have to wait a few more years for retirement because the stock market tanked.

The worst part of all of this is that the cabal of rich guys who run our government are asking Americans to sacrifice for... nothing. We're not being asked to tighten our belts to make progress against an evil enemy, solve climate change, or even balance the national debt.

Instead, we're being asked to sacrifice on behalf of policies that will make America worse. Most [economists agree](#) that Trump's tariff policy is outdated (he seems to want to bring back the economy of the [late 19th century](#)) and misguided. Experts [predict](#) that they will bring higher prices, a weaker economy, and higher unemployment.

During his political career, Donald Trump [has taken](#) shot after shot at Jimmy Carter. Trump, who had long [called](#) Carter the worst president in American history, spent much of 2024 criticizing Joe Biden by saying that he was "worse than Jimmy Carter by a long shot." The implication of this criticism was that Jimmy Carter (who was, at the time, 99 years old, recently widowed, and in hospice) had been a weak and failed president, someone who dimmed America's horizons and asked Americans to shrink their sense of what was possible.

I doubt Trump will be putting on a sweater on national TV — indeed, he once had his stylists [cut](#) a cashmere sweater off of him because he was afraid of messing up his hair by taking it off like a normal person — but he's closer to becoming a 21st-century Jimmy Carter than he'd like to admit.

But at least Carter asked Americans to sacrifice for the environment and the greater good. Trump is asking us to sacrifice for his own ego, so that he won't have to admit that his economic plans are delusional.